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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1151

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000469

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/25/2018

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: FORMER AMBASSADOR TO RUSSIA

KITSMARISHVILI FOCUSES ON POLICY NOW, POLITICS LATER

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

**¶1.** (C) Summary: Former Georgian Ambassador to Russia, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, who famously told the ad hoc parliamentary committee on the war that the U.S. gave Georgia the green light, discussed with the Ambassador his future plans which include setting up an independent news channel; an economic policy think tank; and a think tank in concert with Armenia and Azeri representatives to explore regional democratic development. Kitsmarishvili believed that President Saakashvili squandered opportunities with Russia for a constructive dialogue and missed opportunities for further democratization of Georgia. Despite being highly critical of the President, Kitsmarishvili's view was that the President should be allowed to serve out his term, and saved his most pointed criticism for the non-parliamentary opposition that he described as radical, wrongheaded, and anathema to Georgia's national interests. End Summary.

**¶2.** (C) Comment: Kitsmarishvili is a controversial figure who is widely disliked by both government and opposition figures, a situation he openly acknowledges. Nevertheless, his role in the Rose Revolution as owner of Rustavi 2, as Ambassador to Russia prior to the August conflict (although he never was able to present his credentials prior to his resignation), and his general independent streak make him a unique commentator on current events. In contrast to his somewhat bombastic public persona, Kitsmarishvili's commentary was surprisingly measured and reasoned. End Comment.

#### What Georgia Needs

**¶3.** (C) Kitsmarishvili explained that his future plans were focused on addressing weaknesses in Georgian political discussion and thinking. Namely, Kitsmarishvili lamented the lack of middle to long term policy planning and debate about economic, educational, and regional development issues. Kitsmarishvili said that no public figure was addressing economic and educational development in a serious way. Kitsmarishvili had been working with Irish NGOs and institutions to develop thoughts on various policy paths for sustainable economic development suitable for Georgia. (Embassy Note: Once Kitsmarishvili develops a more concrete plan, he indicated that he intends to approach USAID for potential funding. End Note.). Kitsmarishvili was also exploring the possibility of launching an independent television news source which he believed was achievable with relatively little funding. Lastly, Kitsmarishvili hoped democratic forces in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia would work together from a regional perspective on how to reinforce democratic development across the Caucasus. (Embassy note: Former Education Minister Gia Nodia has set up a similar NGO that seeks to approach issues from a regional perspective. End note.)

#### Saakashvili Did Everything Wrong

**¶4.** (C) Kitsmarishvili explained to the Ambassador that Saakashvili committed a grave, avoidable error by attacking

Tskhinvali on August 7. Kitsmarishvili said that during his tenure as Ambassador to Russia (April-August 2008), he been advised Saakashvili to cultivate President Medvedev to work on resolving a wide range of bilateral issues including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He noted that he was not naive enough to believe PM Putin was not the ultimate "decider" in Russia, but he saw the utility in attempting to develop a relationship with Medvedev. Kitsmarishvili described the meeting of the two Presidents in St. Petersburg in June 2008 as a wide ranging, free flowing discussion in which Saakashvili openly contemplated giving up NATO aspirations for eventual Russian withdrawal from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Kitsmarishvili thought the meeting was an excellent start and created positive momentum for better Russian-Georgian relations. To his surprise, Saakashvili was very upset and disappointed about the results of the meeting for reasons Kitsmarishvili said Saakashvili could not clearly articulate. Kitsmarishvili had heard rumors that a subsequent meeting in Kazakhstan at President Nazarbayev's birthday celebration between Saakashvili and Medvedev was unproductive, but doubted that Saakashvili's claim that Medvedev had "blown him off" was true. Kitsmarishvili said he could not believe a word that his President says, and that in his view, Saakashvili was more to blame for any negative personal relationship between the two Presidents than Medvedev.

¶5. (C) Kitsmarishvili said that Saakashvili's inner circle was of the opinion that the Russians were weak and would not respond militarily in South Ossetia last summer. Kitsmarishvili believed Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili and Minister of Justice Zurab Adieshvili (both close

TBILISI 00000469 002 OF 003

Saakashvili advisors) were against the war, but he remained convinced that Saakashvili was getting unrealistic advice about Russian intentions from somewhere else in his inner circle. Kitsmarishvili said it became clear to him in June or July that Russia intended to intervene in South Ossetia and was waiting for a pretext to strike. (Embassy Note: GOG officials have told Post repeatedly that Kitsmarishvili did not send any message of the sort to Tbilisi as Ambassador to Russia during this period. End Note.) Kitsmarishvili argued that Saakashvili made a tragic mistake in eschewing diplomacy with Medvedev and pursuing military action. In spite of this, Kitsmarishvili believed Georgia could now initiate some sort of dialogue with Russia.

On the Other Hand, Maybe Misha Is Not That Bad

¶6. (C) Kitsmarishvili said that, despite his personal anger, he fully supported Saakashvili serving out his term. Kitsmarishvili said despite non-parliamentary statements to the contrary, everything was not wrong in Georgia. He believed the problem was a system that gives virtually unchecked decision-making power to one person. Kitsmarishvili said the focus should be on fixing the system rather than removing Saakashvili from power. Kitsmarishvili had tired of hearing that Saakashvili was "America's Project" and said that Georgia elected him, and Georgians need to deal with him. Kitsmarishvili said that whatever one thinks of Saakashvili, one needs to work with him because he is the President they elected. In spite of their obvious differences, he went on to say that Saakashvili had changed in recent months because he was making a real effort "to be nice" to those who oppose him. He wished that the opposition would recognize this and behave more constructively. Kitsmarishvili believed that open confrontation with Saakashvili was counterproductive to Georgia's interests. He is of the strong opinion that he and like minded individuals should and can work with Saakashvili to focus on reforming Georgian institutions to create a more balanced democratic system.

¶7. (C) Kitsmarishvili had little positive to say about the non-parliamentary opposition, its tactics, and its goals. He stated that the Georgian people were tired of confrontation and protests, and he hoped that the planned April 9 protests would fizzle out. Kitsmarishvili suggested that Russian subversive measures were in full swing and feared some protesters would engage in deliberate provocative behavior to force a reaction. Kitsmarishvili called Merabishvili "a reasonable fellow" but said that if provocations started, the Ministry of Internal Affairs would have to legitimately intervene at some point, which he feared could cause chaos across the country. Kitsmarishvili questioned the motives of the non-parliamentary opposition, and wondered if they were putting their own personal interests ahead of the country. Regardless of motive, he said the non-parliamentary opposition's agenda ultimately serves to destabilize Georgia and coincides perfectly with Russia's agenda. Kitsmarishvili dismissed the idea as naive that replacing Saakashvili with Nino Burjanadze or Irakli Alasania would be an improvement or result in a more democratic system. According to Kitsmarishvili, without fixing the system to incorporate more institutional checks and balances, Burjanadze or Alasania would turn out to be no better and possibly worse.

¶8. (C) Kitsmarishvili described Nino Burjanadze's recent Q8. (C) Kitsmarishvili described Nino Burjanadze's recent behavior (calling for civil servants to strike and encouraging protests) as "completely off the deep end". Kitsmarishvili said he had a hard time believing how radical she had become. Kitsmarishvili was equally flummoxed about Alasania's decision making. He speculated that Burjanadze's increasing radicalism had pushed Alasania to move and make political decisions faster than he would like. He described Alasania's decision to deliver an ultimatum to the President as too radical and politically unwise if Alasania wants to maintain a moderate image. He was equally critical of Alasania's decision to depart for Europe after the ultimatum announcement saying that if he were serious, he would have spent the ten days in Kutaisi, not Brussels. Kitsmarishvili hoped the non-parliamentary opposition would ultimately focus on policy rather than protests, but feared it was growing increasingly more radical.

#### I Was Misquoted Or Something

¶9. (C) When asked about his comment that the United States gave the "green light" to Saakashvili to attack Tskhinvali, a visibly uncomfortable Kitsmarishvili explained that his quotation had been distorted. He said he only thought that strong Bush administration public support of Georgia in general made President Saakashvili think that he had U.S.

TBILISI 00000469 003 OF 003

acquiescence to launch an attack. While this nuanced explanation seems at odds with his public statements on the record, Kitsmarishvili went to great lengths to say that Putin wanted the war as much as Saakashvili and they both were to blame. He stated this had always been his assessment, though only his comments critical of Saakashvili were widely publicized. Kitsmarishvili expressed his willingness to be available at any moment as needed to further clarify his statement, and reiterated that he never thought the U.S. gave Saakashvili a green light.

TEFFT